



ART AND LITERATURE IN A SERVANT-LEADERSHIP  
CURRICULUM FOR UNDERGRADUATE FEMALE STUDENTS  
WHO ARE FROM MEXICAN MIGRANT FARM WORKER  
BACKGROUNDS

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This paper proposes a university leadership curriculum for undergraduate female students who are from Mexican migrant farm worker backgrounds. The curriculum incorporates the philosophy of servant-leadership and utilizes literature and art to provide media that are congruent with the cultural background of the students. The curriculum's intent is three-fold: a) to improve the capacity of Latina migrant students to be leaders and fulfill leadership roles in organizations and communities; b) to contribute to the understanding of servant-leadership and its possible congruency with the culture of female Mexican migrant students; and c) to add to the current knowledge of leadership in order to continue to develop and restructure curricula that are gender-specific and that integrate the values, traditions, and knowledge of other cultures.

Universities have an important responsibility in the development of future leaders who will impact the public and private sectors both in the United States and abroad (Skolnikoff, 1993). Therefore it is important that university students develop leadership abilities that can be utilized as they contribute to society (Hackman, Olive, Guzman, & Brunson, 1999). Having the opportunity for leadership development may be particularly important for Latina/o students because of their increasing numbers in the United States and their traditionally limited access to formal leadership positions and educational opportunities (Castellanos & Jones, 2003). Being exposed to a leadership curriculum could increase the leadership potential for Latina



students. If a leadership curriculum for Latina students is to be as effective as possible, it will need to provide a model as well as be presented in a context that is congruent with the students' gender and culture. Servant-leadership is a philosophy that can prove congruent with the cultural paradigm of most Latina students due to the similarities between the concepts and ideals of servant-leadership, and the cultural norms and values of the students' cultural background.

The paper is organized into the following sections: a) Historical Overview of Latina/os in Higher Education; b) Women from Mexican Migrant Backgrounds; c) Servant-Leadership for Latinas; d) General Description of a Servant-Leadership Curriculum for Latinas; e) Conclusion.

#### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF LATINA/OS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

According to Kelly (2005), the United States has lost its leadership role as the most highly educated nation in the world: "We are losing ground to several countries, particularly with respect to our younger population which represents the future workforce" (p. 1). In losing these young people's potential, society loses a portion of the individuals who could constitute the future leadership capacity of this country. One reason for losing ground, Kelly postulated, is the failure of the United States to raise the educational attainment of the minority populations to the rate of whites. Kelly noted that from 1980 to 2000 the educational attainment gaps between whites and Latinas/os widened and that "if these educational disparities are not addressed, anticipated demographic shifts will have a major impact on the educational attainment of the United States' population" (p. 1).

Latina/o students are a significant part of the university population. However, despite projections that Latina/o populations will be the largest minority group in the United States by the year 2010, making up 13.8% of the population (Hernandez, 2000), their numbers in four-year institutions is still small; Latina/o students remain seriously underrepresented in higher education. Of all the racial and ethnic minorities in the United States,



Latina/os are the least likely to complete a college degree (Hernandez, 2000). In addition, for the past three decades Latina/o students have been the least likely to take a direct path to obtaining a baccalaureate degree. These statistics pose a serious problem “because it is estimated that the work force will increasingly consist of people of color, with a large percent being Latina/os. Without a change in the educational system, the future work force will largely be illiterate and marginal” (Perez & De La Rosa, 1993, para. 4). These figures have implications for institutions of higher education in regard to recruiting, providing access, financial aid, assisting students in their transition to college, and retention (Hurtado & Kamimura, 2004). They also have implications for providing students with knowledge, values, and skills that will prepare them to fulfill positions of leadership to impact the social, educational, economic, and political spheres of society.

Women also comprise part of the student population in higher education, and in recent years Latinas have entered institutions of higher education in larger numbers. Kelly (2005) reports that between 1980 and 2000, in nearly all racial/ethnic populations ages 25-64 with a bachelor’s degree or higher, females have met or surpassed the educational attainment of males.

Gloria, Castellanos, and Orozco (2005) found that women who were of second-generation Mexican heritage, many of them of migrant farm worker background, were highly motivated to pursue advanced graduate training. In addition, their findings “challenge stereotypes of Latina students in higher education, as they valued higher education, believed they could overcome any barriers to achieve their educational goals, and used active coping responses which informed their positive and healthy functioning” (para. 1). Latinas’ strengths, coupled with their resilience and their desire to serve their communities, place many of these women in a position to seek leadership roles.

Due to the smaller number of Latinas in higher education compared with women in other ethnic groups and the Caucasian population (Hernandez, 2000), it is imperative to ensure that Latina students succeed in



their chosen majors and obtain the tools that will allow them to participate in leadership positions (Bordas, 2001) should they choose to do so throughout their lives. It is through various leadership roles that Latinas can make unique contributions in an increasingly diverse society.

#### WOMEN FROM MEXICAN MIGRANT BACKGROUNDS

Statistics show that Mexicans constitute the largest group of new immigrants to the United States, making up 64% of the total U.S. Latino/a population (Guranaccia, 1997). A sub-group of immigrants is migrant farm workers; 94% of this group has been identified as Mexican or Mexican American (Menchaca & Ruiz-Escalante, 1995). Some individuals from the Mexican migrant farm worker population will become part of the student body in institutions of higher education.

By the time students from migrant farm worker backgrounds enter a university, their lives have been ones of continual movement and disruption. They have made and recreated their lives as they followed the crops and their hopes for a better future. Some of the issues that impact these students' lives and education are poverty, isolation, lack of English language proficiency, partial acculturation, disrupted education, lack of educational opportunity with resulting incompetence, and economic, cultural, and social discrimination (Chavkin, 1991).

Additional barriers encountered by some female students from traditional Mexican backgrounds include external expectations such as assumptions that they will be responsible for "caring for younger siblings, and pressure from boyfriends or fiancés who expect their girlfriends and future wives not to be 'too educated,' as well as from peers who accuse them of 'acting White' when they attempt to become better educated" (Anonymous, 2001, para. 7). In addition, some parents are hesitant to allow their daughters to travel away from home to attend a university. Other issues faced by female students include "an inhospitable campus climate, few mentors, cultural stereotypes and a sense of cultural misfit which influence their college navigation" (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005, para. 5). The women



who navigate these obstacles exhibit resilience, great courage in challenging traditional norms, and ability to navigate and/or reconcile conflicting cultural values.

For many of these students, the idea that “farm workers learn early on that their bodies are worker’s bodies and nothing else” (Castaneda, 2001, para. 3) had to be challenged by the belief that they were not only bodies, but also minds that could achieve an education that would present them with better opportunities than their parents had. “These students’ experiences of working the land alongside their parents, as well as the hardships of migrant life seems to provide them with a sense of accomplishment and competence that is difficult to obtain through school” (Mores, 1999, p. 2). For many of these students, this sense of accomplishment and competence will assist them in persevering through their academic careers by providing a strong work ethic. In addition, Garza (1998) points to the success of migrant students, asserting, “In spite of their lifestyles that label them as at risk, it is their migrant life background which also gave them the skills to become resilient and academically invulnerable” (p. ix). These qualities of resilience, courage, and strength are, in part, what provides these students with the possibility of realizing their leadership potential.

#### SERVANT-LEADERSHIP FOR LATINAS

For many Latina students from migrant farm worker backgrounds, higher education has become a reality more often than was true in the past. These women have unique qualities and skills due, in part, to their cultural background. For example, many migrant students are bicultural and bilingual. This way of being and skills learned in becoming bicultural and bilingual can provide a unique advantage when living in an increasingly diverse society. Latinas will have an opportunity to fulfill leadership roles, yet many of them will not have been exposed to ideas and knowledge regarding leadership. As the findings of Hackman, Olive, Guzman, and Brunson (1999) showed, many leadership programs were designed to meet the needs of unique and limited student populations. Latinas, in many instances, have



not been part of these groups, and therefore many of them will not have been exposed to ideas and knowledge regarding leadership. It is to these women's advantage, as well as society's, to provide them with a leadership curriculum that prepares them for the possibility of leadership in their lives.

Offerman (1998) suggested that leadership scholars have not devoted much time to carefully rethinking the traditional leadership theories and models to accommodate leadership styles of diverse populations. In addition, Murphy and Rigiio (2003) suggested that there is a need to explore the relationship between culture and leadership in order to develop descriptive typologies that can offer a guiding framework to members of diverse cultures for implementing coherent leadership development efforts. In addition, many leadership theories were developed without regard to women. It has been generally assumed that whatever is said about leadership applies equally well to both men and women. It is time to look at leadership theories with women's experiences, contributions, and strengths in mind.

Institutions of higher education have the opportunity and the challenge to educate the next generation of leaders, and more specifically to provide women with leadership curricula and activities that are congruent with their gender and culture. Studies have shown that because women of color are discriminated against regarding gender and race, their academic experiences, in many instances, are characterized by exclusion and alienation (Nieves-Squires, 1991; Washington & Newman, 1991). Given that there is evidence of women of color feeling excluded and alienated during their academic experience, there might be a need to explore whether a curriculum designed specifically for women of migrant farm worker backgrounds could alleviate the sense of exclusion and alienation. This curriculum would utilize traditions, knowledge, and values from their cultural backgrounds as a positive tool that could enhance learning and cultural pride.

The proposed curriculum makes the assumption that culture works interdependently regarding the beliefs of leadership (Del Castillo & Torres, 1988). The curriculum provides Latinas with a model of servant-leadership to explore how, and whether, this model is congruent with their cultural



background. Understanding whether certain styles are preferred by Latinas is critical in identifying leadership theories that are more congruent with their culture of origin. In addition, this understanding can assist in developing or enhancing theories that are more consonant with this population's culture.

This curriculum utilizes the philosophy of servant-leadership in the belief that this philosophy has elements that are congruent with, and have been exhibited by, leaders within the Latina/o culture of these students. In addition, it makes use of the students' familiarity with stories and art, which are very much a part of their culture of origin, in order to enhance their understanding of servant-leadership.

Robert Greenleaf (1977) proposed the philosophy of servant-leadership. He stated that leadership was bestowed upon individuals who were willing to be servants first. In addition, he explained:

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least not be further deprived? (pp. 13-14)

Servant-leadership offers much to migrant students and is congruent with some of the values of Latina culture, which embraces the idea of service. The idea of service is reflected in the language that contains phrases such as *a sus ordenes*, or *mande*, which, loosely translated, means "at your service." The idea of service is also reflected in the way people relate to each other. For example, according to Bordas (2001), "This tendency toward group benefit is rooted in the indigenous background from which many Latinos spring and is evident when noting the following: in the Nahuatl language of the Mexican Indians there is no concept for the word 'I'" (para. 33). She added, "Their sense of relatedness and helping others was the basis of their world view" (para. 33). In addition, Bordas described



the Mayan Indian version of the Golden Rule: “I am another yourself,’ which reflected their belief that human beings are one people and what one does to another affects oneself” (para. 33).

The idea of service is also embedded in the spirituality of many traditional Latinas/os. Bordas (2001) explained that “spirituality is a mixture of indigenous beliefs and the influence of the Catholic Church; 80 percent identify as Catholics” (Bordas, 2001). According to Rodriguez (2004), “Latina/o culture, religion and spirituality are so integrated that to try to define spirituality separated from culture creates a false dichotomy and does a disservice to the Latina community” (par. 6). The teachings in the Judeo-Christian tradition espouse the ideas of justice, human dignity, and service (Rodriguez, 2004). The Judeo-Christian teachings combined with the inherited cultural traditions from indigenous people seem to be congruent with the philosophy of servant-leadership. Bordas (2001) postulated that through compassion, service, and strong spiritual roots, Latina and Latino leaders such as Cesar Chavez have practiced the essence of servant-leadership (para. 35).

Spears (1995) added that servant-leadership is leadership that includes “shared decision-making power” (p. 4). Covey (1998) described servant-leadership as an approach that emphasizes “increased service to others, a holistic ecological approach to work, promoting a sense of community, of togetherness, of connection” (p. xv). This model of leadership can bring people together as equals, a desired goal for many Latina students who want to bring equality to all spheres of society, promote social justice, and create a sense of community familiar to many of them (Rodriguez, 2004).

Some may argue that the idea of a servant in relation to the historical background of women, and more specifically Latina women, might continue to promote the idea of women in a subservient role. However, when the idea of servant is examined and juxtaposed with the idea of women as leaders who are in positions to make changes in their lives and the lives of their communities, the understanding of service from a historical, political, and cultural point of view becomes clear, and Greenleaf’s definition of the



role of the servant can be understood in a different light. These ideas will be discussed in the curriculum, and critical thinking will be encouraged during the class discussions that deal with the concepts of servant, service, and leadership.

Lopez (1995) proposed that the idea of a servant-leader challenges us with a paradox, and that “this paradox confuses us because it asks us to live with simultaneous opposites” (p. 150). Latina individuals, due to their history, cultural beliefs, and life conditions, are perhaps more comfortable living with paradoxes than are peoples of more industrialized countries. The idea of servant-leadership may not be a foreign one, especially for many of those who historically have lived a life of service with or without power.

#### GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF A SERVANT-LEADERSHIP CURRICULUM FOR LATINAS

This section describes the framework, goals, and objectives of the curriculum. In addition, it describes the methods and activities used for teaching servant-leadership. Finally, it provides an example of a session.

##### *Framework of the Curriculum*

Spears (2005) distilled from Greenleaf’s philosophy of leadership ten characteristics that he believed were of great importance for the development of servant-leaders. These characteristics, “listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people and building community” (pp. 32-36), serve as the framework for this curriculum. However, the focus of the curriculum will be to provide students not only with the development of these characteristics and the skills that may aid in obtaining them, but also with the idea that “at its core, servant-leadership is a long-term transformational approach to life and work, in essence, a way of being that has the potential for creating positive change throughout our society” (Spears, 2005, p. 30). Powers and Moore (2005) identify five of the ten characteristics described by



Spears as being the “inner components of the servant-leader’s character. These are: building community, commitment to the growth of people, foresight, conceptualization, and awareness” (p. 125). The separation of characteristics will be followed by, and the five characteristics will be employed in, an exploration of the idea of the servant-leader as one of *being* a leader.

The idea of servant-leadership as a way of being will also be examined through the readings about women’s lives that exemplify the idea of servant-leadership in their personal and communal lives. In addition, through the engagement in dialogue, the students will have an opportunity to voice their understanding of the readings, as well as the opportunity to identify people in their lives and communities who exemplify the servant-leader. Students will also reflect about their lives and themselves in relation to the idea of servant-leadership.

The remaining characteristics will be presented throughout the sessions in order for students to conceptualize, learn, and identify these characteristics in the readings. Students also will reflect about their own personal characteristics and explore ways in which they might want to enhance or develop their own capacities as servant-leaders.

In addition to utilizing the ten characteristics of a servant-leader and the idea of servant-leadership as a way of being, the framework is conceptualized as one that pays particular attention to the gender and culture of the students. Within this framework there is an inclusion of the ideas of leadership and, more specifically, of servant-leadership in relation to the cultural experience of bicultural women from farm worker backgrounds.

### *Goal and Objectives of the Curriculum*

The goal of the proposed curriculum is to provide students with an understanding of the philosophy of servant-leadership, which encourages leaders to live a life of service. In addition, students will examine the philosophy of servant-leadership in the context of their gender and their culture of origin and will articulate a vision of leadership that is congruent with their lives.



The learning objectives are as follows: a) express an understanding of servant-leadership as a way of life through identifying the importance of the personal characteristics of a servant-leader (as proposed by Spears, 2005) that flow naturally from deeply held beliefs about the worth of persons; b) demonstrate understanding of the impact of biculturalism in the conceptualization of the ideas of leadership; and c) develop and express a personal vision of leadership, and demonstrate understanding of the idea of servant-leadership in relation to their own leadership stance.

These objectives will be measured by the students' understanding of the readings as demonstrated through their engagement in dialogue, their writings, and their application of the concepts in case examples and discussions. In addition, art and the articulation of the meaning of their art will be employed to assess the students' learning.

#### *Use of Literature and Art in the Curriculum*

The use of literature is familiar to students from migrant backgrounds, who belong to a culture in which stories and storytelling are an integral part of everyday living. By reviewing ancestral and current stories of Latinas, students can realize that they are connected to the historical processes occurring throughout the history of their culture of origin. Through poems, stories, and "dichos" (sayings), women can find resemblances of their experiences in the written word and thereby, perhaps for the first time, read in a book that their struggles and triumphs are similar to the experiences of other women. The selected literature will include stories of women who can be described as servant-leaders due to the way they lived their lives and because of their commitment to serving others in their communities, even at the expense of placing their lives, and those of their families, in jeopardy. Books to be included are: *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* and *Let Me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines* and other short stories. These stories will provide students with an opportunity to reflect upon and engage in dialogue about the idea of servant-leadership as a way of being in the world. Personal stories shared



among the women can provide social support and solidarity within a private sphere (the classroom), which may encourage them to make their claims within the public sphere in the future (Ramirez, 2002).

In the book *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art: Veinte Siglos de Arte Mexicano* (Museum of Modern Art, 1940), art in the Mexican culture is conceptualized as follows:

Mexican people possess extraordinary genius for plastic invention and formal beauty. It will not be difficult to discover in our arts that the finest works are those with a religious or social conviction. The Mexican, although capable of imitating reality, uses it for the most part symbolically; that he enjoys the free play of elaborate decoration and conveys messages contained in forms charged with meaning; that he understands monumentality and also takes delight in minuteness; that the rich profusion he loves obeys a secret discipline; that he is delicate even to softness and violent to imprecation; and that in him a profound and ancient sorrow nourishes the flowers of laughter and irony. (p. 17)

In many instances it is in the contradictions that one finds the essence of Mexican art and the soul of its people. It is the familiarity with the art used in everyday life in the culture of these students that makes the paradox of servant-leadership an idea that might be easily understood by Latina students.

To create art, an individual engages in a process. Throughout this process, elements such as awareness, construction of meaning for the self and others, suspension of the known, thinking and creating together, re-construction of stories, and creativity are present. These elements are also present when engaging in the process of leadership. Preble (1973) asserted, "The production of art will reveal, clarify and extend experience by providing ways of perceiving things directly and intensely, as well as giving form to such experiences. Through these processes, the artist makes personal vision accessible and emphasizes our shared concerns" (p. 22). In creating art, the students find an avenue whereby their vision of leadership can be crystallized for themselves and others.



The group process of art-making also encourages a sense of community. In creating a sense of community in the classroom and opening a space where art can be created, students might come to know themselves by introspection and by communal sharing. Fassel (1998) describes how Greenleaf “knew the value of stepping back, taking stock, retreating so as to nurture the vision then engaging again. His always probing question is, ‘How can I use myself to serve best?’” (p. 228). In order to use oneself, one must learn about the self. It is hoped that the classroom might be a space where students can have the opportunity to come to know themselves better. It is in this space that the unfolding of self to others might come to be realized through the sharing of their art. Throughout the process of creating and engaging in community with others, the students can discover parts of themselves previously unknown to them. In doing so, they might come to know how creative and powerful their collective and individual voices can be. This self-knowledge and the experience of mutual discovery in the classroom can provide students with a powerful milieu for developing the attitudes and tools of a servant-leader.

#### *Methods and Activities Used in the Sessions*

The curriculum will be presented from the perspective of a learning paradigm described by Powers and Moore (2005) as one in which “faculty create environments and experiences that bring students together to discover and construct knowledge for themselves as active members of communities of learners” (p. 126). To create this environment, the instructor takes the stance of one who facilitates and assists in the creation of a community of learners. The ideas of servant-leadership will be presented through short lectures, and emphasis will be on allowing students to engage in reflection, critical thinking, collaborative learning, and dialogue.

In creating this environment, particular attention will be given to incorporating the culture of the students. One aspect to be considered is language. Since language is such an essential part of how individuals view and express their reality of the world, students whose primary language is



Spanish might feel they can better express certain concepts, feelings, or ideas in their primary language or by mixing the Spanish and English languages. If all students in a class are bilingual, consideration might be given to conducting the class in both languages.

Some of the learning activities include readings, discussions, and writings. Students will read books about Latina women whose lives embody the idea of servant-leadership. The women will also contribute to the learning community by presenting and recommending short readings. The students and instructor will discuss the readings and identify the concepts and characteristics of a servant-leader, as well as issues of gender and culture in a leadership setting. Students will also engage in dialogue about leadership case scenarios that will allow for further exploration of the concepts presented. In addition, students will write about their learning and make connections to their lived experiences.

Another learning activity is the creation of art. After the presentation of concepts regarding leadership, the readings, and dialogue, the women will create pieces of art such as collages, masks, drawings, and sculpture. Toward the end of the class, the women will create *nuestro mural* (our mural). This activity will allow for further understanding of Greenleaf's (1977) idea of having a common vision and shared purpose as the first step in creating community. Through the mural students will operationalize ideas of servant-leadership, as well as of self as a leader, and self in community. The mural will be gifted to the university in the last session, during which a *fiesta* or celebration will take place to acknowledge the learning and community that students created. During the last session the students' art will be on display throughout the room. At the conclusion of the class students will be invited to evaluate the class as an instrument for learning the philosophy of servant-leadership and assessing its congruence with the students' culture.

### *Example of a Session*

In the third session, an overview of the ten characteristics of the ser-



vant-leader will be presented. The objectives of the session are for students to a) understand these characteristics and b) explore how these characteristics might apply to themselves. Students will also identify the characteristics in relation to Domitila, the woman from the assigned book: *Let Me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines* (1978). They will consider not only Domitila's characteristics, but also how her way of being exemplifies the idea of a servant-leader. The students will accomplish the objectives by writing their own characteristics and areas they might want to develop and improve; they will then come together in small groups and discuss the book and their writing. A class discussion will follow.

Finally, students will create a piece of art. Students will be encouraged to find images and symbols that connote servant-leadership. They will be encouraged to think of these pieces as reminders of ideals they might want to espouse. These pieces can later be used as personal "amuletos" (amulets). After the art is completed, students will engage in dialogue about the process of the creation of their art and the meaning of their piece.

#### CONCLUSION

Greenleaf (1977) addressed his ideas of servant-leadership in relationship to higher education. He expressed some concerns in regard to the role that universities had failed to play in "offering explicit preparation for leadership" (p. 164) and suggested that "some influential educators not only denigrate leadership but administer what has been called an anti-leadership vaccine" (p. 164). His concern is still relevant today, and universities are challenged to conceptualize leadership curricula that prepare students to contribute to society through their leadership. This preparation also needs to be expanded to consider the needs of an increasingly diverse student population on university campuses.

Greenleaf (1977) also wrote about the idea that "natural leaders who arise among the disadvantaged will find the way and organize the effort



themselves” (p. 164). He believed that the best service a school could offer to these students was not to homogenize them, but rather to develop their ability to lead their people to secure a better life for the members of their community and the community at large. His idea is relevant to many Latina students who are committed to improving the lives of others in their specific community and for universities who want to enhance society.

The intention of learning is to reach new understanding and, in doing so, to form a new basis from which to think and act. It is hoped that by engaging in learning about servant-leadership students will not only acquire new knowledge, but will also engage in learning that leads them to action as servant-leaders.

A curriculum rooted in the philosophy of servant-leadership, literature, and art that is congruent with the Latina’s migrant farm worker background can be an instrument through which undergraduate students can learn about leadership. Having been engaged in a process in which they can reflect and learn about servant-leadership, and the self in relationship to others, each Latina student can become excited about the possibility of being a servant-leader who, as Greenleaf (1977) proposed, might be a “dreamer of great dreams” (p. 16).

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